

MEMORANDUM

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

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MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

THROUGH: Richard T. Kennedy *RTK*FROM: John D. Negroponte *JDN*

SUBJECT: What Happens If Things Go Sour in South Vietnam?

Introduction

This paper deals first with how things could go wrong in SVN. The second part discusses measures we might consider taking if and when they actually do.

How Things Could Go Wrong

Drawing on experience from the 1963-68 period, I have sketched out three different ways in which I think things might conceivably start to unravel in South Vietnam within the next year. They are:

1. A political crisis in South Vietnam coinciding with the SVN presidential campaign;
2. Serious military setbacks in I and II Corps;
3. Overextension of GVN resources in Cambodia.

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INSTRUCTIONS APPLY

The scenarios are illustrative only and not intended to be taken as forecasts. However, I confess a personal bias at the outset. This is the belief that, with army unity and political stability, the GVN can hold out against almost any military contingency (viz, the Tet offensive). The converse simply isn't true. If a power struggle develops once again within RVNAF, the whole cycle of instability which we witnessed from November 1963 to May 1966 may be upon us again (e. g., urban unrest, revolving door governments, neglect of countryside, declining RVNAF effectiveness, etc.).

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A. Urban Discontent and Political Instability Coinciding with the 1971 Presidential Election Campaign

1971 could be a highly disruptive year politically. The ingredients for trouble are already present: the militant Buddhists have staged a minor comeback through victory of their slate in the Senate elections; Tran Van Don and other older generals are working on "Big" Minh's presidential candidacy; General Ky is again making noises to the effect that he will run and according to some intelligence reports, is saying Thieu should step out of his way; several key national issues contain tremendously divisive potential depending on how they are actually handled (e.g., the Paris talks, the economy, etc.).

The key element in this kind of deteriorating situation would be army disunity. If, for example, two candidates with current ties to the military such as Ky and Thieu were to each make bids for the Presidency, then the bitter power struggles of the past might develop again; civilian political groups such as the Buddhists might succeed in fomenting urban unrest either at their own initiative because they felt the army and administration would be too divided to move against them or because they were being manipulated by one or another of the rival military factions. This sequence of events might then lead to the kind of preoccupations with Saigon politics so characteristic of 1964 and early 1965, a retrenchment of ARVN units from the countryside and general administrative paralysis. GVN countryside control figures would fall off dramatically, leaving territory, population, and resources to the NVA/VC for whatever follow-up military measures they may wish to take.

It could be argued that "Big" Minh's candidacy might have similarly divisive effects; but arguing against the proposition would be the fact that he has been out of power for more than six years now, he does not have extensive ties with present military commanders, and his principal support will likely come from I Corps Buddhists and liberal Delta Southerners whose combined showing in support of civilians Suu and Huong in the 1967 presidential elections was not very impressive.

There are, of course, variants to the scenario sketched out above which could be equally destabilizing. Thieu could, for example, decline to run again and refuse to back any one candidate as a successor, again raising the spectre of a divisive power struggle in the Army. He could be assassinated, with the same results. He could conceivably make political concessions to the PRG in Paris

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unacceptable to a substantial part of the military establishment. In all of these cases, the pattern of deterioration in schematic terms would look something like this:

Army Disunity → Urban Unrest → Deterioration in Control
of Countryside → NVA/VC Offensive Preparations

The foregoing was, in my judgment, essentially the pattern of events in South Vietnam from Diem's downfall in November 1963 until June of 1965 when the Directory of 10 Generals (with Thieu as Chief of State and Ky as Premier) took over.

B. Serious Military Setbacks in I and II Corps

The NVA/VC could, even in the absence of any political developments in their favor on the national level, conceivably take to the offensive in lower I Corps and northern II Corps (Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh and Phu Yen and the neighboring mountain provinces of Kontum and Pleiku). These are traditional communist strongholds and pressure points; they are close to Laotian lines of supply; and severe setbacks, particularly along the Binh Dinh/Pleiku axis (Route 19) would entail the risk of "dividing the country in two," to use the expression that was in vogue in 1965. The control picture in Binh Dinh (Vietnam's largest province with about 1 million people) is already not too bright and, with declining U. S. force commitments, the strategically located, though thinly populated, adjacent highland provinces might prove difficult for RVNAF to cover.

I have difficulty pursuing this scenario much further. My own guess is that a concerted enemy effort in the areas mentioned could lead to plummeting control figures in the affected areas and the isolation of I Corps from the rest of the country. It would also force the GVN to consider redeploying assets from the Saigon and Delta areas northwards, thus jeopardizing solid gains achieved in the south.

It is difficult to speculate what political pressures this contingency might generate at the national level. Political opinions might polarize, as they have in the past, between those who favor a "war government," declaring a national emergency and GVN (and/or U. S.) retaliatory measures against the North and those who argue that more than ever before the military realities of the situation require serious efforts to accommodate the communists politically. The pressures on Thieu would be great, and the demands on his leadership qualities--given the declining U. S. involvement--probably greater than during the 1968 Tet offensive.

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Schematically a deterioration along these lines might look like this:

NVA/VC Attacks → Control Losses in Countryside →

Conflicting Pressures to Retaliate or Accommodate →

Political instability

C. Overextension of GVN Resources in Cambodia

Cambodia could become a serious soft spot for the GVN. Were the enemy to make a major push in Cambodia, perhaps even threatening Phnom Penh, there would be pressure on the GVN to help save the situation. Resources would most likely have to be from III or IV Corps, with attendant risks to gains achieved there over the past couple of years. If I were a planner in Hanoi, I think this is a strategy I would seriously consider -- a division size threat to populated rice growing areas in Cambodia designed to suck ARVN resources away from Vietnam, then regimental or larger-size moves against province capitals in III Corps or even a Tet-style attack against Cholon.

A variant on this contingency would be large scale NVA/VC operations in Cambodia, followed by attacks in the areas mentioned in Contingency B (Binh Dinh, Quang Ngai, et cetera) -- in effect, whipsawing the GVN as U. S. combat inputs decline.

The GVN might then be faced with the choice of losing Phnom Penh to save its rear or saving Phnom Penh and facing the prospect of dramatic losses in its own countryside. In the confusion and pressure of events, it might end up losing on both counts anyway.

As in the case of Contingency B, it is difficult to guess what immediate effects this scenario might have on political stability in Saigon.

What We Could Do

This section of my paper discusses each contingency separately in the context of what we might do on the ground to save the situation and what some of the political postures are which we might consider taking both diplomatically and vis-a-vis U. S. opinion. Two working assumptions of this section are (1) we would not want to consider a simple "bug-out" solution, yet (2) we would not want to consider

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reintroduction of U. S. combat troops. This administration has pursued a policy of steady redeployments and reversal of this trend would involve unacceptable domestic political costs.

An important consideration throughout is the fact that the contingencies visualized, should any one of them occur, will be taking place against the background of pre-election activity in the U. S. Bi-partisan support of whatever course we choose will be an objective but one which might be very difficult to achieve in certain circumstances. I have attempted to sort out those contingencies and options which I believe are susceptible of bi-partisan support and those which are less so.

Another important consideration is that, in any fast-moving military contingency, diplomatic action, to the extent that it can be effective, will be confined to the parties immediately concerned. Multi-lateral diplomatic efforts involving countries not directly engaged in the fighting will not be useful in the short-term.

Contingency A. (Urban Discontent and Political Instability)

(a) Steps in Vietnam: In considering this contingency I assume that GVN stability is essential to success of Vietnamization and our redeployment schedule. Thieu's reelection of 1971 for another 4-year term would thus appear to be very much in our interest.

If Thieu decides to run, I think we should back him covertly by discouraging potential rival military candidates such as Ky.

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In the unlikely event Thieu steps down, we should urge him to throw the advantages of his incumbency to a candidate acceptable to the military.

In the event of urban unrest, I think we should encourage the GVN in whatever measures it takes to deal with the situation swiftly and firmly.

If political crisis persisted nonetheless, we would then be faced with the urgent issue of how the crisis affected our redeployment schedule. Our dilemma would be that the deteriorating countryside conditions might logically call for delay or cessation of redeployment of remaining combat troops, if any, to help the GVN ride out any such contingency while there would be other pressures on us to disengage even more rapidly. If we chose to delay redeployments to help stabilize matters, we would want to convey to the GVN some time limit to put their house in order, after which our redeployments would resume at their original schedule.

(b) Public Posture: This contingency strikes me as a most difficult one in terms of U.S. opinion. The guts of the problem would be that, in the eyes of public opinion, American boys are out there fighting communists while Vietnamese nationalists are tied up fighting each other. Prolonged political crisis could lead to revulsion towards our whole remaining effort by erstwhile supporters of our policy; and would certainly lead to chants of "I told you so" by the critics. In brief, the threatened viability of the GVN could result in a surge of public doubt concerning our residual efforts out there.

If we opt for delaying U.S. troops redeployments to help stabilize the situation, I think generating broad bi-partisan support would be difficult and the President himself might wish to avoid staking out a firm public position. We would want to play the situation as a "temporary setback" to Vietnamization, leaving the public handling of unpleasant news regarding delayed redeployments to DOD. In backgrounders and in private White House dealings with the Hill we would want to emphasize (a) the temporary nature of the delay which will not affect our longer-range plans and (b) that in the last analysis it is incumbent on the Vietnamese themselves to prove the viability of their regime and our actions can only serve to temporarily offset the adverse consequences which the political crisis has had on the situation in the countryside.

If we opt for continued redeployments in this contingency, our predicament with respect to public opinion is less difficult. Our public posture on the GVN's political difficulties would be relatively aloof, confined perhaps to statements that we hope the difficulties can be solved as promptly as possible; and we would state that these political difficulties do not affect our redeployment schedule.

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(c) Diplomatic Posture: On the negotiating front, with or without an internal GVN crisis, we are always faced with Communist insistence on negotiating away the GVN's existence directly with the U.S. In the event of persistent internal political difficulties in Saigon, I would foresee no change in our present position, although pressure to settle political issues directly with Hanoi would intensify from some quarters in the U.S.

In this contingency, it does not seem that a diplomatic initiative towards any third country would serve a useful purpose.

Contingency B. (Military Setbacks in I and II Corps)

The GVN has lived with seemingly intolerable military situations in the past and can probably do so again, providing the political leadership in Saigon does not panic or otherwise come unglued. No matter what option we chose to pursue, one of the first tasks at hand would be to counter impressions -- which would likely develop in the U.S. and elsewhere -- that everything was lost and Vietnamization a complete failure. If the GVN could ride out the Tet offensive, as it eventually did, without increased U.S. involvement, then it can probably ride out any contingency in I and II Corps.

(1) Public Posture: In the public affairs field, we would want to consider playing this as a "temporary" setback to Vietnamization, recalling past GVN recoveries from even more substantial NVA/VC pushes such as Tet; we would probably want to blame events on increased infiltration illustrative of enemy bad faith while the U.S. had been taking steps to wind down the war and, depending on the military and diplomatic options we were considering, warn of the consequences these developments might have both on the ground and at the Paris talks.

How opponents of the U.S. Administration might play this one in a pre-election atmosphere is obviously difficult to predict. They could exploit it no matter what course we chose. However, unlike Contingency A (political instability), blame could be placed squarely on Hanoi's intensification of military efforts in marked contrast to our own record of de-escalatory measures and to that extent bi-partisan support might be easier to generate.

In seeking support for whatever countermeasures we might take, we would want to stress our reasonable approach as evidenced by the President's October 7 proposal, contrasting it with Hanoi's belligerent attitude. If we chose to delay redeployments, efforts would have to be

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made to persuade Congressional leadership of both houses that Hanoi's actions called for a show of firmness on our part. Key members of past administrations might be susceptible to similar persuasion under the circumstances (LBJ, Vance, Acheson). I do not, however, believe that efforts to gain bi-partisan support for dramatic retaliatory measures such as an invasion of South Laos or a 1-3 day bombing campaign of NVN (discussed below under Military Steps) would be successful and we would simply have to weigh the risks of public outcry at home against estimated advantages of pursuing that course on the ground.

(2) Military Steps:

(a) Continue Redeployments: This is one of the two principal options. Within it we would have some latitude, however. We could, for example, lift some of the operational constraints on remaining combat forces, thus risking higher casualties but perhaps increasing their effectiveness. Or we could keep withdrawing our forces -- but examine ways in which we might alter the ratio of remaining combat to support troops so that a higher proportion would be for combat. (The feasibility of this latter option declines steadily as our combat forces are withdrawn and the role of remaining support forces is progressively confined to that of supporting RVNAF. The more this happens the more difficult it is to alter the "mix" of our combat and support forces without adversely affecting our support for Vietnamese combat troops.)

Meanwhile, the GVN would not be without resources to deal with the situation, although we would have to recognize that difficulties in I and II Corps might cause them to divert resources away from Cambodian border operations and/or the Delta.

There would be variants within the overall framework of continued U.S. redeployment. An RVNAF invasion into the sanctuaries of southern Laos is a possibility whose general merits are apparently being explored in the military strategy section of NSSM 99. I don't have any personal feel for the military merits or demerits of such an operation.

Another variant would be some kind of brief bombing campaign over North Vietnam designed to create uncertainties in Hanoi about our intentions and raise the spectre of a resumed full-scale bombing campaign if they do not desist. The difficulty here lies in the debatable effectiveness of any bombing campaign plus the fact that if we wanted to make the threat implied in a brief bombing campaign credible, we would have to be genuinely prepared to take even firmer military measures.

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(b) Stop Redeployments: The other principal option would be to stop redeployment of U.S. forces. The GVN would welcome this, and Hanoi would be frustrated in achieving what is now its first priority, e.g., complete U.S. troop withdrawal. The shift in policy would be unpopular at home, but the argument would have to be made that continued withdrawals in the face of this kind of enemy activity would only encourage them to pursue such tactics further.

Under this option, variants such as those listed under (a) above would also be possible -- that is, retaliatory measures against southern Laos with South Vietnamese ground troops or a short-term bombing campaign against NVN. Lifting operational constraints on remaining U.S. forces, as well as upping the ratio of U.S. combat to support troops, could also be considered.

(3) Diplomatic Steps:

Offensive military activity by Hanoi of the type considered in this contingency would be designed to embarrass us by demonstrating that Vietnamization couldn't work and to pressure us into changing our negotiating stance on withdrawals and/or coalition government.

Under the military option of continued redeployments, we might want to move our private negotiating position closer to accepting their demand for a fixed withdrawal date of our forces. The quid pro quo could be a cease-fire followed by a tacit "understanding" on mutual NVA troop withdrawals. This approach could have the short-term effect of de-escalating the fighting and persuading Hanoi that we are moving towards a position more conciliatory to its interests. The difficulty with this posture is that Hanoi would perceive its military escalation as having been rewarded and they might be encouraged to simply wait for further changes in our position without any compromising steps of their own.

Another possibility under the redeployment option would be to maintain a stiff negotiating position on military matters but urge the GVN to be more forthcoming on internal political ones (amendment of Article IV of the Constitution which bans all forms of communist activity, concrete offers for participation by indigenous communists in the electoral process, etc.). A sign of movement on the GVN's part in this delicate area might serve to cool the fighting and facilitate our disengagement. It might also serve to break the ice on internal political issues -- since neither side's flexibility on these has ever really been put to the test. On

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the other hand, the GVN would perceive this as a risky and potentially explosive course, and particularly difficult to discuss under intensified military pressure.

Under our military option of stopping U.S. redeployments, it would seem logical to pursue our present negotiating tactics. One modification might be to urge the GVN to be more forthcoming on internal political matters while maintaining a firm stand on military issues. The rationale underlying this approach would be for the GVN to seek to strike a political bargain from a position of relative strength, e.g., with continued or increased U.S. military support. Given present GVN attitudes on the issue of accommodation, this approach would probably require substantial arm-twisting on our part.

Under this latter option we would want to warn Hanoi both publicly and privately of the futility of and risks involved in their efforts to resolve the conflict through increased application of force. If we are contemplating an invasion of South Laos or a brief bombing campaign over North Vietnam, we might consider warning them privately in advance that the President is considering "strong and effective" measures unless they desist within a certain time frame -- say, 72 hours. We might also want to parallel any such diplomatic move vis-a-vis Hanoi with an approach to the Soviets. However, I personally doubt that our message will be rendered any more effective through a Soviet intermediary. In Paris in the past they have been "helpful" to us only on minor tactical matters and never when larger interests were involved.

Contingency C. (Overextension of GVN Resources in Cambodia)

I have difficulties in my own mind sorting out how problems for us would differ in this contingency as opposed to Contingency B (Military Setbacks in I and II Corps). Some of the problems would clearly be the same -- i.e., the issue of U.S. troop redeployments, the possibility of retaliatory measures against Southern Laotian staging areas and a possible short-term bombing campaign against North Vietnam. The public affairs aspect might be quite different. If the GVN were to intervene heavily in Cambodia and then be dealt stunning blows in its own backyard, the "I told you so" syndrome would likely be even more vocal both amongst the public and in elements of our own government. There would also be strong public resistance to any commitment of U.S. ground forces to save Phnom Penh.

(1) Public Posture: Whatever military and diplomatic options we would consider, we would want to stress publicly Hanoi's responsibility

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for widening the war and characterize the GVN's intervention as evidence of a determined regional effort in support of the common goal of preventing Hanoi's domination of Indochina against the will of the peoples concerned.

(2) Military Steps: The options here would not be substantially different from those discussed under Contingency B. The principal difference would appear to be that somewhere along the line -- a probably very early on -- the GVN would seek to sharply reduce its commitments in Cambodia, irrespective of the consequences for the latter country. We would then be faced with the problem of what military measures we could take either (1) to save Cambodia unilaterally 25X1 or (2) to beef up our military support for affected areas in SVN in order to retain RVNAF forces in Cambodia. Using our own ground forces to save Phnom Penh would, of course, be a new ball game.

(3) Diplomatic Steps: A severe military threat to Cambodia with accompanying deterioration in SVN raises diplomatic problems beyond the scope of this paper. One possible scenario would be to continue our present course of dealing with Vietnam problems in a separate negotiating context. Another would be to deal with the Cambodia/Vietnam issues in a more connected fashion than we have heretofore. The latter course might prove desirable, and even necessary, if we reached the decision that continued or additional U.S. military inputs required to prevent some compromise of present objectives in Indochina were impossible. In such a case, we might consider pressing hard for an expanded Indochina conference and start examining the trade-offs we might be willing to consider to salvage what we could.

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